

**Amendment to the Claims:**

1. (Currently amended) A water-based drilling fluid composition comprising water, a smectite type of clay, and a carboxymethyl cellulose (CMC), wherein the CMC is characterized by forming a gel at 25° C after high-shear dissolution in a 0.3 wt % aqueous sodium chloride solution, the final content of the CMC in the aqueous sodium chloride solution being 1 wt % for a CMC having a degree of polymerization (DP) of >4,000 more than 4000, 1.5 wt % for a CMC having a DP of 3,000-4,000 3,000 to 4,000, 2 wt % for a CMC having a DP of 1,500-3,000 1,500 to less than 3,000, and 4 wt % for a CMC having a DP of <1,500 less than 1,500, the gel being a fluid having a storage modulus (G') which exceeds the loss modulus (G'') over the entire frequency region of 0.01-10 Hz when measured on an oscillatory rheometer operating at a strain of 0.2.
2. (Currently amended) The drilling fluid composition of claim 1, wherein the CMC has a Brookfield viscosity of more than 9,000 mPas after high-shear dissolution in a 0.3 wt % aqueous sodium chloride solution, the final content of the CMC in the aqueous sodium chloride solution being 1 wt % for a CMC having a degree of polymerization (DP) of >4,000 more than 4,000, 1.5 wt % for a CMC having a DP of >3,000-4,000 more than 3,000 to 4,000, 2 wt % for a CMC having a DP of 1,500-3,000 1,500 to 3,000, and 4 wt % for a CMC having a DP of <1,500 less than 1,500.
3. (Canceled)
4. (Currently amended) The drilling fluid composition of claim 3-1 wherein the smectite type of clay is bentonite, a mixed metal layer hydroxide, attapulgite, sepiolite, or mixtures thereof.
5. (Canceled)
6. (Currently amended) The drilling fluid composition of claim 5-2 wherein the smectite type of clay is bentonite, a mixed metal layer hydroxide, attapulgite, sepiolite, or mixtures thereof.

7. (New) The drilling fluid composition of Claim 1, comprising from 0.05 to 3 weight percent of the CMC, based on the total weight of the drilling fluid.
8. (New) The drilling fluid composition of Claim 2, comprising from 0.05 to 3 weight percent of the CMC, based on the total weight of the drilling fluid.
9. (New) The drilling fluid composition of Claim 1, further comprising electrolytes.
10. (New) The drilling fluid composition of Claim 2, further comprising electrolytes.